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TAGS: [KIRF](#) [KISL](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [SA](#)
SUBJECT: SAUDI SHI'A CELEBRATE ARBAEEN, BUT NOT WITHOUT
CONFLICT

REF: A. 08 RIYADH 121
[1](#)B. 07 RIYADH 2223

Classified By: Consul General John Kincannon for Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: On February 27 and 28th, Eastern Province (EP) Shi'a celebrated Arbaeen, a religious festival marking the end of the forty days of mourning that follow the death of Imam Hussein (commemorated during Ashura). Along with Ashura, the foremost bellwether of SAG/Shi'a relations, celebrations such as Arbaeen help provide a barometer for the tone of relationships between both the Shi'a and the government and the Shi'a and their Sunni neighbors. 2008 saw an increase in both the number and size of the Arbaeen celebrations in Qatif, and a decrease in the presence of government security agents. While there were no disturbances during this year's Ashura, Arbaeen saw a confrontation in the Qatif village of Anak that reminded locals of the serious religious tensions that still exist in the area. Meanwhile, Shi'a in al-Ahsa were again prevented from any public commemoration of Arbaeen. END SUMMARY.

CELEBRATIONS LARGER IN NUMBER AND SIZE, SECURITY MINIMAL

[1](#)2. (C) Just as Arbaeen is a lesser holiday relative to Ashura, the celebration of Arbaeen sees smaller crowds, fewer processions, and less emotional displays of spirituality. PolOff attended numerous Arbaeen celebrations in the Qatif-area on February 27 and 28. Similar to Ashura, commemorations centered on lectures by shaykhs at local husseiniyyas, processions of young people performing haza (the three primary types of haza being beating one's chest, flagellating oneself, or cutting one's scalp), and community plays re-enacting the ordeals of Hussein, Zainab (mother of Hussein), and Zahra (sister of Hussein). Also present was a market in downtown Qatif, slightly smaller than its Ashura counterpart, in which Shi'a books, videos, CDs, pictures and clothing were sold. Prominent among the goods were works by Hizbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah and radood (cantor) Basim Karbalai. There was no security presence at the various Arbaeen events held, and the only overt extra law enforcement activity in the city was a handful of Ministry of Interior Special Security Force checkpoints stationed at the entrances to the Qatif area on the night of February 27.

CLASHES IN THE VILLAGE OF ANAK

[1](#)3. (C) Despite continued positive movement in the degree of religious autonomy granted by the SAG to the Shi'a of Qatif, violence in the village of Anak reminded the area that

underlying Sunni-Shi'a tensions exist. According to media reports and second-hand accounts from Post contacts, in the early morning of February 28, in Anak village, one of the few Sunni majority pockets in the Qatif oasis, Sunni and Shi'a young men clashed, throwing rocks and firing gunshots. Although various car windows and windshields were smashed, there are no reports of serious injuries or deaths. Several police cars reportedly arrived on the scene to disperse the crowd soon after the firing of shots.

¶4. (C) The series of events that culminated in the conflict began when, days before Arbaeen, Shi'a youth in Anak - who have traditionally gone to other Shi'a villages to celebrate religious occasions - decided to hang flags, banners, and posters in the area for the commemoration of the holiday. The Sunni in the area soon responded by tearing down these materials and confronting their Shi'a neighbors with obscene words and threats. The Shi'a supposedly countered these actions by calling in friends and family from surrounding villages to answer the Sunni bullying, escalating the situation until violence erupted. Shi'a contacts note that the sectarian situation in the village has shown signs of tension in previous weeks, as there has been a recent increase in incidences of Salafis in the Anak area handing out inflammatory leaflets, fliers, and recordings. Two days after the clash, the village remained under stringent police control, as the authorities sought to arrest those involved in the incident. Post contacts feel that, despite continued calls from members of both sides to reignite the confrontation, cooler heads will prevail between the Sunni of Anak - largely of the Beni Khalid tribe - and their Shi'a neighbors.

NO PUBLIC CELEBRATIONS OR VIOLENCE IN AL-AHSA

¶5. (C) As has been the case in all previous religious celebrations in al-Ahsa over the past years, there was no public celebration of Arbaeen in the majority-Shi'a city. Hasawi contacts report that the January 5 warning from al-Ahsa regional Governor Badr bin Jiluwi to local Shaykhs regarding the prohibition of public celebrations for Ashura 2008 was still "in effect" (Reftel A). The private celebration of Arbaeen, taking place in homes and husseiniyyas, continued without problem, and there were no reports of violence or arrests in the al-Ahsa area. Contacts expressed surprise and cautious optimism that there had still been no religiously-motivated arrests in al-Ahsa by the SAG since Ashura. With the commemorations for the death and birth of Prophet Mohammad upcoming and having faced increased local efforts to prevent Shi'a religious activities (Reftel B), the Hasawi Shi'a are still worried that "the other shoe will drop."

¶6. COMMENT: The events of Arbaeen 2008 are consistent with Post's analysis of trends in the EP community. Qatif Shi'a continue to receive more religious autonomy from the SAG, and are experiencing more freedom in their religious lives. In spite of this, there clearly remain many Saudis who regard Shi'ism with deep suspicion, if not outright hostility. The events of Anak village indicate that some might not be willing to simply stand idly by while Shi'ism blossoms in Qatif. Post will continue to monitor any further signs of Sunni reaction to increasing freedom of Shi'a expression. Meanwhile, al-Ahsa continues to experience stagnation or regression in religious rights, depending on one's opinion. And while recent weeks have seen a slight calm, leading Hasawi Shi'a do not believe that this indicates the beginning of any greater religious liberty in their area. END COMMENT.

(APPROVED: KINCANNON)
FRAKER